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# Merton-CIA link?

Speculation continues on possible assassination  
of famed Trappist over Vietnam war opposition

By Stephanie Overman

WASHINGTON (NC) — A story about speculation that Fr. Thomas Merton's death was caused by CIA-connected agents has been called "nonsense," by Trappist Brother Patrick Hart and defended as "plausible" by its author.

Brother Hart, who was a friend of the famous Trappist priest-author, told the Louisville (Ky.) *Courier-Journal* that such speculation is "irresponsible journalism." Brother Hart lives at the Abbey of Gethsemane in Trappist, Ky., which was Father Merton's home for 27 years.

Father Merton was electrocuted by a fan Dec. 10, 1968, while visiting Bangkok, Thailand.

The Aug. 3 issue of the *Courier-Journal* quoted Brother Hart as saying, "No one here has ever felt the CIA had anything to do with his death."

Joseph Sweat, who wrote the original story on the possible CIA link, defended the theory proposed by some of Father Merton's friends that an agent "not on orders from the top" was responsible for Father Merton's death. The idea is "plausible," he said in a telephone interview.

He wrote the story for *The Tennesse Register*, newspaper of the Nashville Diocese. It was

carried by *National Catholic News Service* May 19.

"He was coming into a boiling cauldron," Mr. Sweat said of Father Merton's trip to Southeast Asia at that time. Father Merton, who was opposed to the Vietnam war, "was unpopular with persons in power in government at the time," he added.

The theory "is a fascinating piece of speculation by people who are not kooks, people I had known for some time and I don't think are irresponsible," Mr. Sweat said. He had agreed not to use the names of his sources in his story.

"I personally have no theory," Mr. Sweat added, and "I just wanted to report what they're saying." He said he tried to make it clear in his story that the priest's friends were speculating and that a CIA connection was never proved.

Mr. Sweat quoted one of Father Merton's friends: "I have reason to believe some agent, perhaps an overzealous native of the area with only loose ties to the CIA, saw a golden opportunity to help the cause and tipped the electric fan over into Tom's bath water." Father Merton's death was listed as accidental.

Brother Hart said Mr. Sweat has a number of facts wrong. He said Father Merton was in a

shower rather than a tub, so there was no tub for anyone to tip a fan into.

John Howard Griffin, another friend of Father Merton, wrote a letter to the *Catholic New Times* of Toronto, which ran the *NC News* story. He said there is no evidence for the speculation and that there were errors concerning the tub, where Father Merton was staying and whom he was visiting.

Mr. Sweat responded that he got information from an encyclopedia article on Father Merton's life and death and newspaper stories from the time of the death.

The discrepancies in the details are "kind of irrelevant," Mr. Sweat said. "I'm not sure that necessarily shatters the assassination theory."

Dale Peterson, the CIA's chief of media relations, told the *Courier-Journal*, "I can assure you that the CIA had nothing to do with Thomas Merton's death."

"That is not something we do — go around killing U.S. citizens. It just would not be done, period," he added.

Brother Hart said he was not surprised by the rumors. Father Merton was relatively young and in good health, no one saw him die, the circumstances were bizarre and no autopsy was performed.